

THE ROLE OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS IN BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

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June 1999

This paper was presented at an Economic Policy Institute symposium on June 15, 1999. The symposium was funded by grants from the United States Department of Labor and the Alfred P. Sloan foundation. Opinions and views in the paper are those expressed by the author and in no way are they to be taken as expressions of support for these particular positions by the Department of Labor, the Alfred P. Sloan foundation, or the Economic Policy Institute.

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Introduction

American families are being pulled in many directions. The pressure on men and women to maintain their income has forced both husbands and wives into the workforce. While dual earner families have increased, there has been no change in the demands of maintaining a family and dealing with dependents. With more people working and working more hours, balancing work and family life has become a key issue for American workers. The response of policy makers to this concern has focused on providing child care assistance or policies that increase the time off from work for childbirth and parenting. Some employers have expanded the scope their work/family programs to include assistance with elder care and flexible work arrangements. More recently, employers, who are sensitive to work and family issues, have begun to see that the way work/family policies are implemented by supervisors and the overall workplace climate can have a significant impact on the ability of workers to balance their work and family lives.

In this paper, we examine the effect of high performance work practices, job characteristics, and the work environment on workers' views of whether the company helps them balance work and family. There are many ways companies can help workers balance work and family responsibilities. Providing employees with traditional benefits such as health insurance, a pension plan, and paid vacation days can ease family-related burdens. Moreover, formal work/family policies that are implemented by companies, such as flexible work arrangements, assistance with child or elder care, and expanded

leave, can make it easier for employees to spend time with their families or act on family concerns. Much of the literature on work/family conflict focuses on the effects of these types of formal policies and benefits provided by companies. This research focus reinforces the view that helping workers balance work and family is all about benefit packages and targeted family friendly policies. The little empirical research that has been conducted on the effects of work environment or job characteristics examines the effect of these factors on *family* life. Barnett (1995) maintains that the structure of work and the overall work environment can affect family life through spillover effects. The experiences at one place (work) influence the psychological state or well-being of workers at another place (home). For example, one study of female health care workers employed at least half-time found that their positive experiences on the job mitigated the negative mental-health effects of troubled mother-child relations on mothers' level of distress. In addition, another study found that challenging jobs, which enabled employees to use their skills and provided opportunities for advancement, reduced the distress of mothers who felt burdened by child-care responsibilities (Barnett 1995: 40). There has been little if any research on whether the work environment or the characteristics of the job affect company efforts to help workers balance work and family.

Using data gathered from a survey of workers in three industries, we show that a high commitment environment characterized by trust, intrinsically rewarding jobs, understanding supervisors, and high satisfaction with benefits positively influence the employees' perceptions of the extent the company is helping them balance work and family concerns. After a brief discussion of our sample, we examine the effects of high performance work systems on company efforts to help employees balance work and

family. This is followed by an analysis of job demands, scheduling, and high commitment work environment variables.

Description of the Sample

During 1995-1997, we visited 44 manufacturing facilities across the country in the steel, apparel, and medical electronics and imaging industries. The purpose of our visits was to gather information about the effect of high performance work practices and other human resource practices on plant performance and worker outcomes. We conducted interviews with managers and union officials about the human resource practices, the organization of work, and various performance outcomes at their facilities. In addition, to these manager and union interviews, we obtained a list of employees at each site and conducted a survey on a stratified random sample of workers. These employees were asked about their experiences with work organization and human resource practices at their plants. Approximately 100 workers at each of the 40 plants were surveyed – nearly 4,400 employees in all.

Table 1 presents an overview of the employees who participated in this study. This analysis in this paper is based on the experiences of nonsupervisory employees in these plants. As Table 1 shows, the sample is quite diverse in terms of the gender, education, and race/ethnicity of workers. Table 2 shows the average family structure for the sample as a whole. Like most of the labor force, our sample has a high proportion of dual earners with and without children.

Above Average Employers

While the three industries in this study are broadly representative of the technologies and workforces found in a wide range of manufacturing industries, the individual plants that participated in this study are probably not typical of U.S. factories. A high, and perhaps disproportionate, number have taken steps to introduce high performance work practices or are at least contemplating doing so. These plants are good employers who offer their employees decent benefits and employment security. Eighty-five percent of the plants offer nonsupervisory employees pension benefits, and 100 percent of the plants offer health insurance, paid vacation, and life insurance to their employees. Interestingly, none of the plants offer child care assistance benefits to their employees, although 25 percent of the plants offer family leave benefits beyond what is available through the Family Medical Leave Act. Seventy-three percent of the plants offer some form of explicit or implicit employment security.

In addition, the worker survey reveals that 69 percent of workers report receiving formal training, and 73 percent are satisfied or very satisfied with their health benefits. Sixty-two percent report being satisfied or very satisfied with their pension benefits. Moreover, there are very few part-time workers in our sample. Ninety-four percent of workers are working 40 hours a week or more.

Simply providing good benefits and full-time employment does not mean that employers implement high performance work practices or pursue a high commitment work environment. Using our worker survey data we are able to assess the extent to which the plants in our sample are engaging in these work-related strategies and the

effect this has on their efforts to help workers balance work and family. In the next section, we examine the effect of high performance work practices.

High Performance Work Practices and Work/Family Balance

Table 3 shows the results of a ordinary least squares regression with robust standard errors and controls for plant clustering. The hierarchical nature of our data set means that individual observations are clustered within plants where workers observe similar plant practices; therefore, we must correct for the fact that our observations are not entirely independent. In addition, the robust standard errors and plant clustering corrections adjust for the fact that workers in the same plant may have common unobserved characteristics that are not accounted for by the model. The dependent variable in the regression analyses conducted in this paper is the extent to which the company helps workers to achieve a balance between their work and family responsibilities as perceived by workers. This variable is measure on a 1 to 4 scale (1=not at all -- 4=to a great extent). The means for the variables used in the analysis are presented in Table A of the appendix.

Our analyses in Table 3 focus on different aspects of a high performance work system (HPWS). The core component of a HPWS is the extent to which the organization of work provides its nonsupervisory employees with the opportunity to participate substantively in decisions. High performance work systems replace many of the hierarchical interactions associated with traditional forms of work organization with structures that require workers to have autonomy over their job tasks, to participate in self-directed teams, to be part of problem-solving and other offline teams, and to

regularly communicate with employees outside their work groups (see: Appelbaum et al. forthcoming). In addition, we examine other components of a high performance work system such as skills (training) and incentives (pay-for-performance, promotion opportunities, employment security, and company staying competitive).

Each column in Table 3 is a separate regression; the first regression run on the total sample followed by separate regressions for a sample of women and then men. After controlling for demographic characteristics and family structure, most high performance work system variables are significant. Our opportunity to participate scale consists of four components: autonomy over task-level decisions, membership in self-directed production teams and offline teams, and the extent of communication with workers, technical experts, and managers outside one's work group. This scale along with informal training, opportunities for promotion, employment security, and company staying competitive have significant and positive effects on the extent to which their company helps workers balance work and family responsibilities. These results do not change in the women or men samples. Of all the HPWS variables the opportunity to participate scale consistently has the largest effect on the dependent variable. Taken together these results indicate that the work structure has a significant effect on the worker perceptions of how well the company is helping them balance their work and family obligations.

High Commitment Work Environment and Work/Family Balance

An important part of any employment relationship is the environment in which people work. High commitment workplaces are characterized by a mutual commitment

by employers and employees to the organization by creating an environment of open communication, challenging and rewarding jobs, safe working conditions, adequate resources, satisfactory benefits, and a high degree of trust. Employers establishing a high commitment environment may also encourage informal ways to help workers balance work and family, such as through encouraging supervisors to adjust schedules to allow workers to deal with family issues as they arise or through childcare referral services to workers who need it.

In Table 4, we examine the effect of other job-related variables, scheduling, and high commitment measures on work/family balance efforts by companies. The regression is run on the total sample and controls for demographic characteristics, family structure, industry, and high performance work system variables. The results show that intrinsic rewards, trust, and childcare referral services have the largest effect on the extent to which companies help workers balance work and family. When workers feel that their jobs are challenging and rewarding and that the environment in which they work is characterized by a high degree of trust, they are more likely to feel capable and able to cope with the demands of family life. Moreover, they are more likely to recognize the efforts companies are making to help them balance work and family responsibilities. In addition, satisfaction with health and pension benefits and having an understanding supervisor also have positive and significant effects. Workers that work in a high commitment environment recognize that the organizational climate provides them the opportunity to better balance work and family.

Table 4 also shows that when the job demands, scheduling and high commitment variables are added to the regression, the opportunity to participate scale becomes

insignificant (result not shown). This implies that the way work is structured and the opportunity to participate on the job is not as important as the intrinsic rewards of the job and the overall work environment.

Conclusion

Companies help workers balance work and family responsibilities in many ways. The analyses in this paper show that the characteristics of the job and the overall work environment have significant effects on the workers' views of the extent companies help them balance work and family. These results send a message to companies that helping workers balance work and family responsibilities is not just a matter of benefits and formal family-friendly policies. It is also important to provide jobs that are challenging and rewarding, create a environment characterized by trust, train supervisors to accommodate workers' needs, and provide childcare referral services.

References

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